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A vessel that grows as it is filled will never grow full. If a bin able to hold a cartload grew while you were dumping your load in it, you could never fill it. The soul is like that: the more it wants the more it is given; the more it receives the more it grows.

MEISTER ECKHART

Every advance in spiritual life has its corresponding dangers; every step that we rise nearer God increases the depths of the gulf into which we may fall.

ROBERT H. BENSON

If our spiritual life does not grow where we are, it will grow nowhere.

OSWALD CHAMBERS

You can't catch the wind in a net.

CHARLES H. SPURGEON

A REVIEW ARTICLE
GOD OF THE POSSIBLE?

Roger Nicole

GOD OF THE POSSIBLE: A BIBLICAL INTRODUCTION TO THE OPEN VIEW OF GOD

Gregory A. Boyd
Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker (2000)
175 pages, paper, $12.99

In the 1980s and 1990s a movement developed among some theologians who consider themselves as evangelical in which God's foreknowledge of future decisions of free agents was declared impossible. These are known as "free will theists" or again as the upholders of the "Openness of God." Notable names are David and Randall Basinger, Gary Friesen, William Hasker, Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, and John Sanders.[1] A friendly presentation by Roger Olson in *Christianity Today* (January 9, 1995) was accompanied by critical observations by Douglas F. Kelly, Timothy George, and Alistair E. McGrath. Millard Erickson and Norman Geisler have published important criticisms of this approach.[2] Recently Gregory Boyd issued *The God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God.*

CONTENTS OF THE BOOK

In this volume the Bethel College theology professor presents in a very lucid manner what he sees as the biblical evidence for an open view of God and against the "classical" understanding of the immutability of God's plan. After

a brief introduction explaining how he was led to adopt an open view, there are four chapters as follows.

Chapter 1 provides a list of thirty-two passages of Scripture commonly advanced by upholders of a fixed future and gives Boyd's comments to show that neither these nor other analogous ones actually prove a divine foreknowledge of the whole future in all its detail (21-51).

Chapter 2 lists and comments on a number of Scriptures that show God as "repenting" or changing his mind. These, Boyd opines, manifest that God faces at least "a partially open future" (53-87).

Chapter 3 discusses some advantages provided by a view of a partially open future as Boyd envisions it (89-112).

Chapter 4, the longest, undertakes to discuss eighteen questions or objections that are raised with reference to the open view of God (113-56).

An appendix adds nineteen additional passages (sixteen from the Old Testament and three from the New Testament) that, according to Boyd, support the open view (157-69).

Three pages of endnotes and three for a Scripture index complete the volume.

All of this material is presented in a very clear manner. Boyd's position is stated plainly so that the reader is not perplexed as to the nature of the view advocated. The chapter on questions and objections proves that he has given considerable attention to the issues and reached a conclusion that gives him great satisfaction.

THE FUNDAMENTAL PREMISE IN ITS CONTRAST WITH THE TRADITIONAL CLASSICAL PREMISE

At the root of this whole subject there is an unmentioned premise that must be clearly grasped in its contrast with the traditional classical theology.

The classical view emphasized that God's sovereign determination of his plan does not eliminate the reality of the rational agents' (angels and humans) ability to take decisions in view of motives so as to be accountable to God's judgment. The *Philadelphia Confession of Faith*, paralleling in this the *Westminster Confession*, states:

> God hath Decreed in Himself from all Eternity, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably, all things whatsoever come to pass; yet so as thereby is God neither the author of sin . . . nor is violence offered to the will of the creature . . . (3:1).
> The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination . . . (3:7).

Because the coexistence of these two aspects cannot be fully harmonized within the range of finite reason, there is a ready recognition of a mystery or antinomy at this point.

The open view asserts that certainty is incompatible with free agency, so that a divine determination has to stop at the place where freedom begins. If freedom is to be properly recognized it is obviously impossible to know in advance what a free agent will decide. Foreknowledge, even with God, is guesswork: educated guesswork perhaps, but guesswork nevertheless. Prophecy, therefore, to the extent that it involves free agents, or agents that are in existence by virtue of some free decision, is clearly impossible. Any attempt to it, even by God himself, remains open to the possibility of being wrong. Assuming, therefore, that God created some free agents in that sense, it was impossible for him to have a clearly delineated purpose with precise expectations in detail. The only possibility is a wide-open universe, not a merely "partially open" universe as Boyd asserts. Obviously God would plan in detail the course of physical bodies like the sun and the planets, or like hydrogen and oxygen, but as soon as free agents have a place in

the equation, a situation of risk is involved. God, by creating angels and humans, ceased to be the almighty sovereign of heaven and earth who planned all things according to his own majestic, wise and holy purpose, but he accepted the role of the monumental gambler who, trusting in his unlimited adequacy, chose to open wide the door to unforeseen, unlimited possibilities to be determined by the will of the creatures. This is what is implied in the title of John Sanders' recent volume: *The God Who Risks*. What the results of this risk entailed will be considered below.

BIBLICAL EVIDENCE

Scriptures that seem to support unlimited knowledge and control by God. In his preface, Boyd informs us that some years back "he combed through the entire Bible" carefully noting every passage supporting the view that the future is entirely settled in God's mind and every passage suggesting that the future is to some extent open (8). One would expect that in chapter 1 he would give us the benefit of the first part of his list. One is therefore greatly surprised that four-and-a-half pages with a total of thirty-two references suffice him for this purpose, followed by a twenty-three-page cursory explanation of these and other passages on the premise of the view of an "open" future.

Some sixty years ago, in connection with the preparation of the thesis for my first doctorate, I did precisely the same thing. In the course of reading the entire Scripture within two weeks, I noted carefully the Scriptures that manifested the detailed divine control and those that marked the impact of human finite decisions. My list was easily ten times as large, and the impact of this total reading within a short time left me with the overwhelming impression of the solid, thorough, and detailed divine control over the whole universe, including rational agents.

Would you believe that the Scripture index at the end

of Boyd's volume contains no reference to any of the twenty-six passages in which the words "elect" or "election" are found, except Romans 8:33; 9:11; and 11:28? And Romans 8:33 is mentioned merely as a reference to Romans 8:31-39 as showing that "our eternal relationship with God is secure," as if we had no free will that could destroy it.

Would you believe that out of nine passages referring to God's purpose before creation, only four are mentioned at all (Ephesians 1:4; 2 Timothy 1:9; 1 Peter 1:20; and Revelation 13:8, which is not even listed in the Scripture index), and when they are referred to they are interpreted as meaning only that there will be some people saved but that God does not know who they are? So our foreknowledge is deemed to have precisely the same extent as God's foreknowledge.

Would you believe that there are at least eighty-nine passages, in addition to those in which election is stated, in which God is presented as the one who chooses those on whom he will bestow his blessing, but that only five of these are listed in the Scripture index (1 Samuel 2:28; Ezekiel 20:5; John 6:70; 13:18; Ephesians 1:4, and the first two are actually listed as evidence that God changed his mind!)?

Would you believe that John 15:16, Ephesians 1:11, and 1 Peter1:2 are not even mentioned in the book? The discussion of Romans 9-11 is postponed until chapter 4, question thirteen (139-44). Obviously Boyd has given short shrift to this part of the task.

The Scriptures interpreted. This is not the place to dispute text by text the interpretation favored by Boyd, but some of them appear very unsatisfactory.

For instance he starts by quoting two texts from Isaiah (46:9-11; 48:3-5) out of twelve within chapters 40-49 that indicate that "God declared the end from the beginning" (41:4, 22-23, 26; 42:9; 43:9; 44:7-8, 25-26; 45:19-21;

47:13; 48:15). Boyd did not need to quote every one of these texts, but the full list of these references does show that we are in the presence of a major emphasis of this section of Scripture. The interpretation advanced (29-31) is that God did not foreknow or declare the future, but simply indicated his own intentions. But this will not do at all. The texts in view are intended to show the basic difference between Yahweh and the heathen idols that Israel was tempted to worship: they did not know the future, but God had declared it in advance. Since Boyd does believe that God does not always realize his intentions (46, 138, 140, 171), God's declarations might turn out to be in conflict with the facts, but this is the very hallmark of the false prophet: "If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing does not take place or prove to be true, it is a word that the Lord has not spoken" (Deuteronomy 18:22) and, "That prophet shall die" (18:20). God's prophecy relates to events, not merely to intentions, that may or may not be fulfilled. Boyd appears to concede this when he writes "the Lord determin[ed] what was going to take place and t[old] his children ahead of time" (31). But on his terms God would not know who was going to be there at any future time, nor how they would behave. He had therefore no way to anticipate the actual events.

Dealing with the advance naming of Cyrus and Josiah, Boyd grants that he "set strict parameters around the freedom of the parents in naming these individuals" (34). But if God predetermined such matters and the parents did not *lose* their freedom in the process, is not this a case where God "micro-managed" the future and where freedom and predetermination are not separate but overlapping?

In the case of individual prophecies like those concerning Peter and Judas, Boyd asserts that Jesus knew the character of these men well enough to anticipate their defection. This however does not explain how God might know

how many times Peter would deny his master *before the crowing of the cock*, nor how Zechariah would foresee the price paid to Judas for his betrayal (Matthew 27:9). There again we have a case of "micro-management," and here the freedom of these two apostles must be recognized, since their sinful action cannot be ascribed to God.

Psalm 139:16 says, "In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed." Boyd offers four explanations: (1) This means simply that David's length of life was determined (conceding this is already interfering with free agency as defined by the professor) and it does not imply that God foreknew all the details; (2) This is a poetic passage and the language should not be pressed too hard (but we doubt whether the professor himself would say anything like that if he wrote poetry); (3) The King James Version reads "in thy book all *my members* were written, *which* in continuance were fashioned, when *as yet there was* none of them." The word "days" is translated "in continuance" and the word "members" is supplied. It is not clear how members would be recorded in God's Book and the meaning would then be that David was not born without a nose or an arm (a rather trite statement); (4) Even if the statement refers to the days of David's life, it does not follow that the inscription in God's Book is unalterable since God's Book of Life can have erasures (Exodus 32:33). (We then should not rejoice that our names are written in heaven [Luke 10:20] but only if they are still there by the time of our death).

It would be better to have one good answer than four weak ones incompatible with each other!

In his interpretation of Romans 9-11, Boyd finds comfort in the fact that classical Arminianism had opposed the Augustinian Reformed understanding of this passage. To people of Reformed convictions this will not count as an advantage. He lists passages that he thinks teach a universal

saving will of God (140) and places them in opposition to the notion of individual predestination and preterition. This he does repeatedly (11, 40, 46-47, 58, 71, 100, 138, 171) without ever stopping a moment to give some consideration to any alternative interpretation that would avoid the conclusion that God is ultimately severely frustrated when he finds his saving will has been defeated in a staggering number of cases.

Boyd holds that these chapters deal exclusively with the destiny of nations or groups, that this is determined by their attitude, and specifically that the mercy of God toward the Gentiles was due to the unbelief of the Jews. He does not explain why the blessings given to the Jews were not extended to the Gentiles before Christ.

Boyd alleges that it is the condition of the clay that determines what the potter will do with any lump, contrary to what both Jeremiah 18 and Paul in Romans 9 assert. If Boyd were right, Paul would have had a much better answer to the question, "Why does he still find fault" (9:29)? to wit: "He finds fault because *you* are at fault."

In the next paragraph he asserts that God's choice is simply a reflection of human choice. God chooses those who are "willing to seek after the righteousness of God that comes by faith not works" (142). But this has transformed faith into a preferential element that is the basis of God's decision: Thus faith in that view has become a meritorious work that spans the full distance between salvation and perdition. Furthermore we have to ask, "Who in the fallen common human condition may be said truly to seek God?" (Romans 3:11).

Finally Boyd concedes that we have no right to question God's criteria of justice. Here he is right on target, but everything he says on this passage seemed to move in the opposite direction. It surely takes a person with uncommon dialectic ability to read out the sovereignty of God in this passage!

SCRIPTURES THAT ARE DEEMED TO SUPPORT THE VIEW OF LIMITED FOREKNOWLEDGE

Scripture advanced in support of the "open view" of God. Greg Boyd does not advance in one block the Scriptures that he believes establish his position. He has first an organized body of them, in which he deals with various categories (55-82). He then has two-and-a-half pages of additional texts listed by the order of their appearance in the Old Testament canon (83-85). Then he gives an appendix with still other passages in the same order and accompanied with brief comments (157-169).

We cannot resent the fact that he has taken for these quotations about double the space granted to the other type of texts. These refer mainly to Old Testament passages in which God is represented as "repenting" and some other texts that speak of a "change of mind."

How are these passages interpreted? Here again we may not undertake to examine and refute every statement. We may start by comparing the exegesis involved in the two contrasting views with respect to the passage that in the first place alerted Boyd to a different approach, 2 Kings 20: 1-11. I will include my comments in brackets.

Open View	2 Kings 20: 1-11	Classical View
	King Hezekiah was afflicted with a terminal illness, so God sent Isaiah to tell him: "This is what God says: Put your house in order."	
"You will die in the immediate future. You will not recover."		"You are terminal. No human power can keep you alive for long."

So Hezekiah was deeply grieved and prayed that God should extend his life.

[Hezekiah managed to change God's mind.]

[Hezekiah's prayer, according to God's eternal plan, was a second cause that brought about the blessing of a divine intervention.]

God heard Hezekiah's prayer and sent Isaiah back to tell him: "I have heard your prayer. I will heal you."

[God's prophecy turned out to be erroneous.]

"I will add 15 years on to your life."

[This second prophecy could fail as well as the former one, because of many unforeseen actions of free agents, e.g., Hezekiah's murder or suicide.]

This prophecy was so spectacular that Hezekiah was led to ask a confirmation on God's part to make sure that Isaiah had indeed reported God's word.

[Hezekiah's request was inadequate, for a miracle in the natural order did not prove that God could control the decisions of free agents, and the length of the king's life depended in part on these.]

He asked for a miracle in the natural order, to wit that the shadow should go backward rather than forward.

[The miracle that God permitted Hezekiah to request did not necessarily demand a special movement of the sun, or even a reversal in the earth's rotation, but a special intense light in the atmosphere could produce such a development. (cf. Joshua 10)]

The miracle occurred and Hezekiah lived another 15 years.

[But God had no business promising something over which he had no control.]

[God thus accomplished what he intended all along and in the process provided important lessons for Hezekiah, Isaiah and his people to the end of the age.]

As a second example let us thake the case of Jonah and the Ninevites, in which the word "repent" occurs three times in the KJV.

Open View	The Case of Jonah and the Ninevites	Classical View
		God intended to spare Nineveh for some time and thus instructed Jonah to go there and proclaim God's wrath against them.

Jonah was reluctant to preach to Nineveh, the perennial enemy of Israel, and he disobeyed God by embarking in the opposite direction.

God then did not violate Jonah's will, but produced a series of very forceful incidents to make Jonah willing to go as instructed.

Jonah then went to Nineveh and proclaimed God's message.

After forty days Nineveh will be destroyed.

Forty more days of your rebellion, and you will experience the destruction that you deserved.

God used Jonah's preaching to provoke a deep repentance in Nineveh from the least to the greatest, even the king and his nobles. They said, "Who knows? God may yet relent" (KJV repent).

And God repented, and the original prophecy proved to be erroneous.

The Ninevites understood God better than had Jonah and reasoned that since God had granted them an unearned respite of forty days, he might be willing to spare them further if they repented.

So God had compassion (KJV, repented) and granted the Ninevites another extension.

[Perhaps of nearly 150 years.]

Jonah was angry because the enemy of Israel had been spared and because he might be rated a false prophet whose prediction did not turn out to be true (cf. Deuteronomy 18:20-22).

The whole story shows that God can change his mind and actually repent, which indicates a turning away from something that is evil.

Yet, this is precisely what Jonah had foreseen (4:1-2)

[Why should he punish with death what he does himself?]

Incidentally, in this case it would appear that God's intervention was not overly considerate of the supremacy of Jonah's free agency, since God used storm, sailors, and a big fish to get him to obey. If God were what Boyd claims, he would probably have said: "I guess Jonah is decidedly unwilling to go, I shall commit the message to a more cooperative prophet."

THEOLOGICAL IMPACT

It would be difficult to exaggerate the impact on the whole scope of theology of the concept of human freedom as constituting a limitation for divine planning and acting.

The inspiration of Scripture. The kind of freedom for humanity posited in the "open" view would preclude such controls by God over the human authors as would permit and even mandate the view that "the Bible alone and the Bible in its entirety is the Word of God written, and is therefore inerrant in the autographs."[3]

If it be urged that the inspiration of Scripture is a unique category in which human freedom is less important than in the course of living, one should be prepared to answer that the complete control of God on the pages of Scripture is no more a violation than the complete control of God on the course of the universe including angels and human beings. What is required is a concept of freedom that is not in conflict. This is why it appears more difficult for Arminian learned thinkers to maintain a thorough plenary inspiration of the Bible than to orthodox Reformed theologians. Fortunately John Wesley did not stumble in this respect, but this trend can be observed in Arminianism. Clericus (1657-1736) was the first theologian of the Reformed confession to speak boldly of mistakes in the original Scripture.

Boyd holds that the Scripture contains anthropomorphisms in which God's actions are described in terms of

parts of the human body (eyes, ears, hands, feet, etc.). He does not hold that God is a material being endowed with such organs. It seems quite in line with this approach to Scripture to posit that at times anthropopathisms represent God's attitude without implying that this constitutes a literal description. This surely is true of the twenty-two passages of the Old Testament where God is represented as "repenting." The Hebrew term *niham* could better be translated "relent," as is often found in the New International Version. In any case it is also expressly stated that God does not repent (Numbers 23:19; 1 Samuel 15:29; Psalms 110:4; Jeremiah 4:28; 15:6; Ezekiel 24:14; Hosea 13:14; Zechariah 8:14.)

Thus the Bible interpreter will have to do justice to both sets of passages. One way to do so is to note that the change does not refer to God's own purpose, but that it is related to a changed attitude on the part of those whom God warned. This conclusion is reinforced by Romans 11:29 where we read that "the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable" and by Hebrews 7:21 where Psalm 110:4 is quoted as "The Lord . . . will not change his mind." The shift is not in God's purpose, but rather in that those whom God warned did repent and thereby moved to a relationship with God different from the one in which the divine judgment was inevitable. This is what Jonah expressly states in 4:2. Probably the translation "relent" is more accurate and readily applicable to God's attitude than to "repent" (*niham*) which seems to imply that something wrong had been done or said.

Surely the Bible places an immense emphasis upon the faithfulness of God that is stressed in both Testaments, manifested in his covenanting with his people, and in his *chesed* translated by "steadfast love" in New Revised Standard Version. God requires our faith in him who is supremely faithful (2 Timothy 2:13).

THEOLOGY PROPER: DOCTRINE OF GOD

Divine sovereignty. The freedom claimed for the rational creatures strips God of the sovereign control he exercises over the whole universe. Who could read Isaiah 40-66 and think that the prophet shared Boyd's view of a priority of human choice over divine decrees? Or Psalm 29, 46, 115, or 135? The Bible knows *no limit* to the sovereignty of God. Surely the book of Revelation makes it plain that the controls are from heaven, and that even the Beast, the False Prophet, the great Babylon, and the Devil himself, united in their opposition to God, can do nothing to defeat his holy purpose. The words of Joseph bear witness to this truth: "Though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good" (Genesis 50:20). When the Scripture speaks of Alpha and Omega it does not limit God's power to the beginning and the end; it includes the whole sweep of the alphabet between these letters (Revelation 1:8, 11; 21: 6; 22:13).

God's risk taking. On the terms of Boyd, it appears that God took a great risk in creating free agents, for indeed he would have introduced a whole category of beings whose decisions have priority over God's own. Furthermore he appears to have been remarkably infelicitous in this approach.

He created free angels, and lo and behold, Satan defected, and with him a multitude of fallen angels, who precipitated into the universe the enormous problem of evil.

When God created Adam and Eve, he seemed to have an expectation that they would be obedient, but both of them fell from their high estate, carrying with them their whole descendance by natural generation, causing all of them to be enmeshed in such an evil situation that they were wholly incapable of returning by themselves to God. They did not lose the ability to make decisions. Otherwise they would have lost their vaunted freedom. But they lost

the integrity of judgment and inclination that would cause them to make a wholesome use of it. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

In fact, after some generations the evil was so rampant that God had to intervene in an almost complete annihilation of humanity in the flood of Noah (Genesis 6-8).

The risk that God took in saving eight human beings in Noah's ark (1 Peter 3:20) turned out unfavorably, for Noah disgraced himself in drunkenness, and Ham showed such disrespect as to warrant a curse upon himself.

The risk was so bad that in order to save any member of the human race it was necessary that God the Son himself should enter into humanity in order to suffer the agony of the lost on the cross of Calvary.

The risk was so great that in the end a huge number of human beings, perhaps even a majority of them (Matthew 7: 13-14), would spend eternity in hell, a place of torment and wickedness, where their vaunted freedom would not enable them to return unto God (Luke 16:26).

But, one may observe, if all of these developments are a part of God's plan, those who believe in the sovereignty of God have no relief as compared to those who hold to the openness of God. And here we say that the relief comes from trusting, knowing that the wisdom, holiness, and compassion of his plan *will* be apparent in the end. Those who talk about openness here will have to put the blame on unseemly risks taken by God who created free agents without knowing what they would do. It is not God's plan, but the lack of a plan, that is the cause of the monumental problem of evil. I would not entrust my money to an earthly gambler with this kind of record! In fact, I don't trust any gambler!

God the chess master. In his fourth chapter (127,128) Boyd compares God to a chess master who dominates the board by an anticipation of every possible move of his/her opponent.

This, I submit, is a very infelicitous comparison for the following three reasons: (1) In chess both players start with a rigorously equal chance both as to the value of the pieces and the number of moves permitted. This would fit a Zoroastrian dualism rather than a theistic outlook; (2) The chess pieces are wholly devoid of a personal will. Thus the model lacks the very thing that Boyd meant to emphasize; (3) In the process of the game, the greatest chess masters have to concede the sacrifice and removal of some of their pieces: pawns, rooks, bishops, knights, even queen. It would be hard to condemn the attitude of one such sacrificed piece in hell saying, "I am now suffering the pain of damnation just to provide the Creator with the entertainment of a chess game!"

God's truthfulness. This too is at stake, for we find that many prophecies and particularly threats from God turn out not to be fulfilled. The cases of Hezekiah and Jonah, discussed above, are representatives of this situation. In some cases, as in Jeremiah 18:8, 10, it is expressly asserted that the statement was not given as a flat assertion of what would inevitably occur, but rather as a warning about the future if those addressed persisted in their evil attitude. Although it is not expressly stated in some cases, it was so understood by the ones addressed. This is certainly the case in the ministry of Jonah among the Ninevites (Jonah 4:1-2).

The sweeping character of God's limitation. Boyd wants to safeguard the view that the future is *partly* settled by God (32-34), but his emphasis that *no free* action can be thus settled involves God in a total ignorance of any futurity in mankind. Human freedom provides an enormous smog in the whole future outlook, for the very existence of any person is conditioned by decisions of free agents. The only control that God truly retains is that over the impersonal universe, that is to say the mineral and vegetable realms for sure, and possibly some parts of the animal

realm. But every day at just about every second he has to take note of four billions of unforeseen decisions of free human agents (two billion of them being probably asleep at any time). What God decides in the inanimate sphere cannot until the last moment be related to the actual earth's inhabitants, for God could not know until then who they are and what they deserve!

This is in radical contrast with the prophetic character of Scripture, where God's relation to humanity is the major theme from Genesis to Revelation. It relativizes and conditionalizes every prophecy, every revelatory dream, every divine promise, for any and every one is subject to be disproved by some development in the free human or angelic order. How then could Boyd write: "We have seen that Scripture portrays God as the omniscient, sovereign Lord of history." (51)?

We have here a situation that is analogous to the description of the respective movements of the earth and the sun. We know, since the days of Copernicus, that the alternation of day and night on earth is due to the rotation of the planet around its polar axis, not to a special movement of the sun. The language of Scripture in this respect is acknowledged to be "phenomenological" rather than strictly astronomical: it reflects the appearance of things to an observer located on the surface of the earth (Joshua 10:12-13; Psalm19: 4-6; etc.). This is still reflected in our modern language about "sunrise" and "sunset." How foolish, it does now appear, to entertain the view that the sun whose mass is 333,000 times that of the earth should revolve around it at a speed of more than 12,000,000 miles per hour (3.333 miles per second). Similarly, the expression "God relented" does not reflect a change in God's decision, but a different manifestation of God's relation due to the corruption or repentance of those humans who are in view. The literal interpretation given by Boyd consti-

tutes a type of pre-Copernican outlook in the theological sphere: Instead of human choices being grounded in the divine decisions, we find Boyd grounding the divine action in the microscopic resolutions of puny men.

THE DOCTRINE OF CREATION AND PROVIDENCE

Creation. The "open view" of God greatly exaggerates the impact of the freedom of angels and humans to the point of making God's decisions subordinate to theirs.

The problem of evil. Boyd holds that the "open view" of God helps us in "our understanding and response to the problem of evil" (98). It frees God from appearing responsible for atrocities like the "Holocaust" or the creation of damned individuals.

This is not the case. Although inclusion of such matters in God's total plan is difficult to understand, the thought that he glibly took that risk without weighing the possible consequences is surely not reassuring. It makes me think of a popular song that starts, "I didn't know the gun was loaded!"

Furthermore, for Boyd, the presence of potential evil is necessary for the reality of free choices. But this argument, if its validity were conceded, would actually deny the true freedom of God himself, unless there were from eternity a potential for evil. This would imply evil's co-eternity with God, drive this dualism into infinity, and thus abandon true theism in order to join Zoroastrianism. It is from this faith that Manicheism derived its major heresies. Yet Boyd ventures to castigate Augustine of Hippo as "being strongly influenced by . . . Manicheism" (172). As a matter of fact, Augustine after having been enticed for a season by Manicheism, repudiated it and wrote some anti-Manichean treatises, and late in life wrote his *Retractions* to correct erroneous statements found in his earlier writings.

The doctrine of prayer. Boyd emphasizes that the

openness of God view is an encouragement to prayer since it makes it clear that God is prepared to change his mind in view of petitions addressed to him (95-98). My question to someone who endorses this position is this: "What do you know that God does not know?" Even if one conceded God's nescience of future contingencies, it would appear that God still has a better grasp of the total present situation than any created being, and that he is likely to be as considerate, compassionate and ready to act as any who approach him in prayer. In this sense assuming that God will change his mind on account of what any of us can say is as bad as or even worse than praying to the saints or to Mary.

If Boyd were right and inclined to pray for me, I would have to respectfully request him not to do so, for I would sooner face God and what he knows than to rely on Boyd's outlook of what is good for me (2 Samuel 24:14).

In terms of Boyd's view of human free will, it would be wholly nugatory to pray for the conversion of anybody. This would be an area where God is already doing the best he can do, in view of his alleged universal saving will. To bring a person to conversion, what would be needed is to address this individual's free will in order to induce repentance and faith, and this is the area into which God allegedly refuses to intervene lest he violate the will of the creature. One could not refrain from noting that it was fortunate that Monica was not carried away by this logic and that she kept praying for her son Augustine's conversion until it occurred. Surely it is important to challenge people directly to repentance and faith, but in view of human depravity this challenge would remain ineffective unless God himself should work in the depths of personality to bring about the new birth.

It would appear that a better understanding of the significance of prayer is to hold that God had included our

prayers in his total plan as valid second causes and has given them usefulness and even necessity in the fulfillment thereof.

The doctrine of human sinfulness. Here Boyd greatly underestimates the entail of original sin by ruling out original guilt (contrary to Romans 5:12-21) and by under-reckoning the impact of original corruption to the point of thinking that the unregenerate sinners, out of their own strength, exercise saving repentance and faith.

The doctrine of redemption. The doctrine of Christ the redeemer is attacked by the open view because it destabilizes the person of Christ by insisting that a full human nature must be capable of a sinful option if the will is to be free. Thus the incarnate Logos must have been able to sin, thus precipitating the suicide of the Godhead! Boyd believes with the Bible that he did not sin, but even the potential is horrifying here, especially since it involves divine nescience of the results.

As a prophet, Christ could hardly foreknow anything that God did not know. Even when he mentioned that no one but the Father knew the day and hour of his coming (Mark 13:32), Boyd doubts that this date was set at all, since the Father himself really could not determine this in advance because of the smog of human liberty. John wrote that "the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy" (Revelation 19:10), but in spite of this, Boyd must maintain that Jesus, in the days of his flesh, could do no more than venture educated guesses about the future.

As a priest he offered a prayer that could not change God's will (Matthew 26:39, 42) although if ever a change was needed, this seemed to be the appropriate occasion. If guilt is indeed a purely individual matter, being the result of an individual free will decision, it could not be transferred from the sinner to the Savior.

This is the reason why Arminians have often adopted a

"governmental" theory of the atonement. I am not charging that this is Boyd's view, but I am warning about the logical implication of a refusal to accept any transference of guilt, whether from Adam or unto Christ. Boyd emphasizes a universal design for the work of Christ (11, 40, 46-47, 58, 71, 73, 100, 138, 171), but he has then to concede that it is not universally effectual since sinners can block its application. On his showing, God must remain permanently frustrated, not having achieved what he intended.

The kingship of Christ must also be understood in terms of the continued exercise of free will by angels and human beings, and thus be sharply limited.

Soteriology. In the doctrine of salvation the "open" view does not do justice to the real predicament of the sinner nor to the sovereign bestowal of God's grace to those he has chosen. God's predestination is reduced to a generous line of blessing for the group of those, whoever they may turn out to be, who have used their free will to accept his invitation. So God does not know in advance the identity or the number of the redeemed. Moreover the emphasis on individual free will makes a true substitution improbable or even unwarrantable, to the great damage of the full gratuity of grace and of the imputation of righteousness. Regeneration is the reward of those who have exercised their free will in order to believe. In this sense faith is indeed a work of the sinner, rather than the work of God (John 6:29).

Boyd's view destroys the significance of the assurance of salvation, since even those who are currently saved may yet freely choose evil and thus fall back into the state of perdition. Perseverance is not the perseverance of God with those whom he regenerated (Romans 8:29-39; Philippians 1:6), it is the perseverance of the saints themselves that can be interrupted at any moment by a free will decision. Those whose names were written in the Book of Life may yet find that it has been erased (42, 74).

The doctrine of eschatology. The "open" view challenges the permanency of both heaven and hell. Let me explain.Those who are in heaven, holy angels and humans, unless they have by that point been stripped of their freedom, must still be able to choose evil rather than good, as Adam and Eve did in the garden of Eden. This is precisely the opposite of the biblical notion of freedom, where sinfulness is identified as slavery (John 8:34) and expulsion from God's abode (8:35). On the other hand liberty is provided by Jesus Christ (John 8:36) and consists in the perfect acceptance of the will of God (Romans 12:1-2). "Those who are born of God do not sin, but the one who was born of God protects them, and the evil one does not touch them" (1 John 5:18).

Vice versa, those who are in hell, the devil, his angels and the reprobates, unless they have by that point been deprived of the freedom that is essential to their nature, may yet by an act of free will choose God and thus cross the unbridgeable chasm mentioned in Luke 16:28.

Ultimately, in terms of the "open" view, there can be no assurance of the final victory of God. There are some prophecies in Scripture that describe the "last days" as singularly evil (Matthew 24:10-12, 22, 37-39; Luke 18:8; 2 Timothy 3:1-5; 2 Peter 3:3; Revelation 20:7-9; etc.). Our observation may well lead us to think that in spite of the Gospel there is a terrible growth of evil around us. The number of non-Christians in the world grows faster than the church. Perhaps the dualism of good and evil that is seen at the start might prevail to the end. Perhaps God has started something that even he cannot control. Even Zoroastrianism had a more hopeful outlook.

The advocates of the "open" view do indeed make a special effort to make sure that they are not thought to be "process theologians" or advocates of a finite god in the trail of E. S. Brightman. The fact that they feel the need to

address this issue does provide evidence that there are resemblances that are regrettable, even though they try to minimize their importance (31).

I am not charging that Boyd holds all these questionable implications, but I am warning that they lie in the logical extension of his position.

HISTORICAL PRECEDENTS

The first objection that chapter 4 considers is the absence of support for this view in the course of Christian literature. Here (114-118) Boyd does indeed acknowledge that there is a rather stupendous silence from the time of the New Testament to the present. He does, however, mention Lorenzo McCabe's volumes on *Divine Nescience of Future Contingencies a Necessity (1882)* and *Divine Foreknowledge* (1887). I owned both of these for more than forty years, but thought that they were not sufficiently weighty to deserve a detailed refutation, although I regularly mentioned them when dealing with the attributes of God in my course of systematic theology. He also claims support of "the popular circuit preacher Billy Hibbard, characterized in McClintock and Strong's *Cyclopedia* as "an eccentric but very able man" (IV: 232).

Boyd further lists G. T. Fechner, Otto Pfleiderer, and Jules Lequier, whom he characterizes as "noteworthy theologians." Otto Pfleiderer(1839-1908) was an outstanding example of extreme Biblical criticism in Germany in the second half of the nineteenth century. His name is hardly calculated to inspire confidence to evangelicals. G. T. Fechner (1801-1887) was a physicist and a philosopher, who was so far from being a theologian or even a Christian that his major book was titled *Zen-Avesta*! As to Jules Lequier (1814-1862), his name is not even listed in the index volumes of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (either eleventh or fifteenth edition) or in other major general encyclopedias or

theological dictionaries available in the well-appointed library of Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando. I finally discovered a brief notice of him in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Paul Edwards (IV: 438-39). And indeed his field was philosophy not religion, let alone Biblical interpretation.

Boyd also claims the support of the commentator Adam Clarke (1760-1832). A brief examination of his comments on a number of relevant passages has failed to provide evidence of that claim. Adam Clarke was Arminian, but on Numbers 23:19 he states that Balaam said, "God is not a man, that he should lie" "to correct the foregoing supposition that God could change his mind." On Jonah 3:10 he says, "the threatening was conditional." On James 1:17 he writes, "He [God] is never affected by the changes and chances to which mortal things are exposed." On Jeremiah 18 and the illustration of the potter he writes:

> By this similitude God shows the absolute state of dependence on himself in which he has placed mankind. . . . In considering this parable we must take heed that in running parallels we do not destroy the free agency of man, nor disgrace the goodness and supremacy of God.

The Arminian view does indeed emphasize the freedom of the will, but in its classical form (Arminius, Episcopius, Wesley, Fletcher, Watson, etc.) it emphasized that predestination was *grounded* in God's foreknowledge in spite of the mystery remaining in the relationship between foreknowledge and free will.

It surprises me that the name of Dr. Terence E. Fretheim, author of an essay on "The Repentance of God" in the *Horizons in Biblical Theology* (10/1988) and of a book on *The Suffering of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) were not mentioned, but even he provides only partial support

to Boyd. In 1977 H. Roy Elseth published the book *Did God Know?* in which he claimed that there were over eleven thousand verses in the Bible that revealed that God changed his mind (186-96). The name of Voltaire might also have been mentioned in connection with his caustic annotations on the Bible, but he denied so many things about God, that his support would be counterproductive.

Thus, during the many centuries in which Jewish and Christian scholars have studied the Scripture, only this pitiful handful of names can be advanced of people who hold to God's ignorance of the future acts of responsible agents. Certainly this creates a tremendous prevention against the acceptance of this position.

My conclusion is the book does not adequately support the view of the divine ignorance of future decisions of free agents. On the back cover Professor Pinnock calls this "a stunning book." For once I agree with him, going so far as to call it "stupefying." *God of the Possible* is an impossible book.

When in the beginning of the fourth century the whole Western civilization was tottering under the impact of what has been known as "the barbarian invasion," God raised for the church a great champion of his sovereignty and grace, and Pelagius, the advocate of human independence, was defeated.

When in the sixteenth century the church itself was shaken to its roots by corruption and unbelief, God raised the great Reformers who reasserted the truths of divine sovereignty and justification by faith alone.

Today we live also in perilous times in which intellectual and moral stability is buffeted by the onslaught of neopaganism and postmodernism. What the church needs are new Augustines, not new Pelagiuses. The movement of the "openness of God" must be defeated.

Author

Dr. Roger Nicole is professor of theology emeritus at

both Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and Reformed Theology Seminary, Orlando, Florida. He is a prolific writer and writing theologian who now makes his home in the Orlando, Florida area. This is his first contribution to *Reformation & Revival Journal*.

Notes

1. Gary Friesen and J. Robin Maxson, *Decision Making and the Will of God*. (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah, 1980); Richard Rice, *The Openness of God* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1985); David and Randall Basinger, editors, *Predestination and Free Will* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVaristy, 1986). (This volume includes one essay by Clark Pinnock titled "God Limits his Knowledge," 143-162.); Ronald Nash, editor, *Process Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987). (This volume includes one chapter by Clark Pinnock titled "Between Classical . . . and Process Theism," 309-327.); David Basinger, William Hasker, Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1994); John Sanders, *The God Who Risks* (Downers Grove, Illinois, 1998).
2. Millard Erickson, *The Evangelical Left* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 91-107; Millard Erickson, *God the Father Almighty* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 67-113; Norman Geisler, "Response [to Pinnock]." Edited by David and Randall Basinger, *Predestination and Free Will* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1986), 169-173; Donald G. Bloesch, *God the Almighty* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1995), 250-260; Roger Nicole, review of "The Openness of God" in *The Founders Journal* 22 (Fall 1995), 26-29; Roger Nicole, review of "Unbounded Love or Unbounded License" by Clark Pinnock and Robert C. Crow in *The Founders Journal* 26 (Fall 1996), 8-12; R. Albert Mohler, Jr., "Does God Give Bad Advice?" in *World* (June 17, 2000), 23; Robert E. Piccirili, "Foreknowledge, Freedom, and the Future" in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (June, 2000), 259-71; Bruce A. Ware, review of "The Case for Free Will Theism" by David Basinger in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (43:1, June, 2000), 165-66; Bruce A. Ware, review of "The God Who Risks" by John Sanders in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (43:2, June, 2000), 339-42; R. K. McGregor Wright, *No Place for Sovereignty: What's Wrong with Freewill Theism?* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1996); Bruce Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2000). Professor John Frame is presently at work on a book critical of open theism.
3. This is part of the doctrinal basis of the Evangelical Theological Society, found on the inside of the cover of any copy of the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*.